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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between learning disabilities and language teaching based on the fact that interaction is inherent to the notion of classroom pedagogy itself. The main argument of this paper is that until a consensus is reached on how to teach a second language to a student with a learning disability, effective interactional instruction may play an essential role in ensuring success in inclusive settings for students with disabilities and differences. The three dimensions of interaction in foreign language classrooms are discussed, including results and recommendations. The conclusion provides suggestions concerning the relevance of teacher self-reflection and effective classroom management as components of any successful language teacher education program, and discusses future foreign language classroom research on learning disabled students that take into account individual learner variables, social context, and affective components of learning and teaching. (Contains 36 references.) (KFT)

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"Interaction in the Foreign Language Classroom: Students with Learning Disabilities and their Teachers"

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Paper presented at the 2001 Conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL), St. Louis, Missouri.

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"Interaction in the Foreign Language Classroom: Students with Learning Disabilities and their Teachers"

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In this presentation, I would like to examine the relationship between learning disabilities and language teaching based on the fact that interaction is inherent to the notion of classroom pedagogy itself. In a recent paper, Arries (1999) indicates that, up to the present, "there is no consensus whatsoever on any single method or approach to teaching a L2 to students with LDs" (p. 99). The main argument of this paper is that until such consensus is not reached, effective interactional instruction may play an essential role in ensuring success in inclusive settings for students with disabilities and differences. First, I will refer to three dimensions of interaction in foreign language classrooms, as an introduction to the next section with results and recommendations from a number of classroom inclusion studies. The conclusion will provide suggestions concerning (a) the relevance of teacher self-reflection and effective classroom management as components of any successful language teacher education program, and (b) future FL classroom research on LDs that take into account issues such as individual learner variables, social context, and affective components of learning and teaching.

At the outset of a new century, the current state of SLA research appears to have reached what could now be considered as full adulthood, taking into account the general agreement in the SLA research community with regard to the interaction of multiple mechanism and processes in the development of the learners' linguistic system. Any possible (and convenient) tensions between lines of research on (a) universal and systematic aspects of language acquisition, and (b) individual and social variation, have moved to a level from which contemporary SLA research attempts to approach the learning process in terms of both the psycholinguistic "routes" of development followed by the learner, and the processes of engagement with the L2 and its speech communities (Peirce Norton, 1995; Mitchell and Myles, 1998; Norton, 2000).

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Current research on classroom interaction shows a similar tendency to come together in its common interest to broaden the understanding of both learning and social conditions in the classroom setting (Lacorte, 2000). In the last 25-30 years, a growing number of studies in educational research have combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies, in an attempt to reach "different perspectives on the most appropriate methods to adopt for particular research questions" (Chaudron, 1988:16), rather than "paradigms" for scientific enquiry (Kuhn, 1970, cited by Chaudron, 1988).

At present, interaction in a second or foreign language classroom may involve at least three levels of consideration:

(1) First, research on first and second language acquisition claims that the development of interactional competence constitutes an essential factor for the overall process of language learning (Long, 1996; Pica, 1994, 1998). According to Joan Kelly Hall, the role of interaction has been examined from different angles, moving from early foreigner talk (FT) studies to the study of the role of the non-native speakers (NNS) in interaction and on to the study of teacher-and task-based talk in the foreign and second language classroom (Hall, 2000). In addition, the sociocultural perspective of language and learning, based on theoretical speculations and empirical investigations from a variety of disciplines, has provided further investigation about interactional processes in the classroom (e.g., private speech, small group interaction, scaffolding, etc.) that may also facilitate language learning (Mitchell and Myles, 1998).

(2) The second level of consideration involves the ways in which current language teaching methodologies may relate the development of interactional competence to the need to maximize the opportunities for communicative practice in classrooms where roles are seen as dynamic rather than static dimensions. For instance, the notion of interactive practices has become an essential component of the Communication Standards, one of the five major goal areas (the "Five C's") for foreign language education recently developed by ACTFL (American Council on the

Teaching of Foreign Languages) and other professional language associations in the US. Instruction in this pedagogical context involves designing a linguistic and social environment in the classroom where students at any proficiency level engage in meaningful, motivating, and cognitively challenging activities in order to acquire a variety of linguistic, rhetorical, discursive, sociocultural, and strategic competences (Hall, 1999: 36-37). This kind of instruction also means for teachers to adopt a different set of roles. More specifically, they become professionals able to employ a "principled eclecticism" (Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Celce-Murcia et al., 1997) so they provide students with the best learning opportunities taking into account their personal and academic characteristics, the social and institutional context of the L2 classroom, and the teachers' own personal system of practical knowledge and beliefs about teaching and the specific learning situation (Borg, 1999).

(3) Finally, multidisciplinary approaches to language classroom research have defined this space as a distinct social setting. In 1984, Dick Allwright wrote in a seminal paper that interaction is not merely "getting students communicating" (as an aspect of "innovative" language teaching methodologies), but the fundamental fact of classroom pedagogy; in other words, everything that happens in the language classroom happens through a process of live person-to-person interaction (Allwright, 1984). The concept of classroom culture constitutes an attempt to describe this dynamic system of patterns created, changed and maintained by the participants in accordance with their pedagogic and social status, expectations, and responsibilities (Holliday, 1994, 1999). This definition attempts to reflect the relationship of the language classroom with different social groups and pedagogic dimensions both within the educational institution – other classrooms, colleagues, peers, administration, curriculum, teaching materials, etc. – and outside the institution – professional associations, family and friends, educational agencies, researchers, publishers, other institutions, etc. (Lacorte, 2000).

In the same way that classroom interaction should not be considered the same as "to get students to talk or communicate one to another", inclusion of students with LDs as full

participants of any given classroom culture cannot consist of merely providing these students with special physical or administrative arrangements.

In a recent paper in *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Rex argues that predominant models of instruction have often treated students with LDs as "individuals in need of attention by their teacher and classmates to compensate for their deficits, rather than as contributing, meaning-constructing members of a community. Most often, inclusion has meant intervention in individual cognition by providing individual students with supplementary curriculum or instruction (…) to support individual performance" (2000: 316).

In this section, I will discuss the results of several recent classroom inclusion studies describing student-teacher interactions within a context in which inclusion is seen as a process of integrating personal experience and cultural knowledge of students with disabilities into instructional activity. The first study by Jordan et al. (1997) sought to define the characteristics of individual teacher beliefs and practices that may contribute to effective instruction in inclusion settings. To this effect, the researchers introduced a continuum of teachers' perspectives about their responsibilities in dealing with the needs of students who are exceptional and at risk. At one end, from a "pathognomonic" perspective (a term which implies the diagnosis and naming of a pathological state), a teacher assumes that a disability is inherent in the individual student. At the other end, an "interventionist" perspective suggests that a teacher attributes student problems to an interaction between student and environment. The nine elementary school teachers participating in the study were placed in different points of the continuum according to an Interview Coding Form, previously developed and field-tested (Jordan-Wilson and Silverman, 1991; Jordan et al., 1993). The inclusive classrooms under analysis consisted of students identified as exceptional, typically achieving, and at risk of needing special education. The analysis of teacher-student interactions in these classrooms indicated that teachers with an "interventionist" view

- minimized organizational and management activities by establishing well-understood routines and by maintaining high expectations for student behaviors;

- orchestrated more academic interactions with students that involved higher order thinking and the construction of higher understanding;
- interacted more with the students who were exceptional and at risk, in an attempt to integrate all students into the comprehension of class content and materials.

The following three studies focus on the pedagogical techniques and discourse practices employed by teachers in order to create the conditions of active participation of students with LDs. Gutiérrez and Stone (1997) examined data from an ethnographic study of literacy practices in bilingual transition classrooms made up of children with a variety of backgrounds: Spanish-speaking students transitioning to full-time English instruction; students with special learning needs; and English-speaking Latino, Anglo, Asian, and African American students. The analysis was informed by cultural-historical theory (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Cole, 1996), which emphasizes the socially situated nature of learning, and suggests that "competence is related to children's access to and participation in varying forms of learning activities" (p. 123). The authors focused their identification of meaning-making classroom processes on one student, previously considered as learning disabled and reading below grade level, and now participant of a recurrent literacy event, the Book Club. During a 6-week cycle of instruction, the student's involvement in such literacy event showed the following stages:

- The student participates in the literacy event both as a novice leader and a legitimate peripheral participant, through providing questions for the group's consideration, and displaying nonverbal behavior such as smiles, eye gazes, and body positioning.
- The student uses of humor as a mediating tool; that is, he tests out his new role as a more active participant by using verbal contributions, which he then quickly undermines.
- The student relies on humor and other verbal strategies such as analogies and interpretations to reinforce his own role in group interaction.

The next study by Kraker (2000) deals with the analysis of teacher-student discourse from a sociocultural perspective, in an attempt to determine the level of support required for students to achieve an understanding of basic (or advanced) concepts (p. 296). More specifically, the purposes of the study were (a) to examine teacher-student discourse with teachers being

participants in the discussion of the effectiveness of their instruction, and (b) to examine academic progress of students with learning disabilities while considering the educational and social context of the classroom. The teacher in this study was videotaped on two consecutive 50-90 minute sessions. The videotapes were viewed by the teacher and transcribed. Transcripts of each student and teacher turn were coded during specific phases of instruction with the purpose of defining the different types of assistance employed by teachers during the instruction, such as verbal prompts ("hints", questions). feedback (direct statements, drill and practice, affirmation of student work), and cognitive structuring (elaboration or reconceptualization of ideas, rephrasing written expression, or task organization). The results indicated that

- Teacher-student verbal and nonverbal behaviors in the classroom include corrections, task organization, expansion of ideas, and monitoring the students' performance on the part of the teacher accompanied by self-corrections, questions, and focused attention on the part of the students.
- The students' performance increasingly reflected the monitoring, corrections, and expansion of ideas that were integrated into teacher-student discourse. In other words, the students viewed their errors and the teacher's corrections as being integral to their learning.
- Specific and consistent verbal and nonverbal management techniques (e.g., erasing, writing for students) provided subtle, but important information to students regarding writing and monitoring behaviors.

Based again on a sociocultural view of inclusion, Rex (2000) carried out a case study of a course with learners usually separated by ability grouping such as learning disability (LD), general, English as a Second Language (ESL), and gifted and talented education and a school. This classroom was part of a program called "Academic Foundations for Success" (AFS), created to promote more social integration and alleviate increasing animosity between student groups in a demographically diverse high school. The main purpose was to analyze how a general education teacher could enact "interactional inclusion" of a student classified as learning disabled who had long been segregated in special education classrooms.

Specifically, the researcher examined two segments of instructional discourse where the teacher creates conditions of active participation for a learning disabled student based on:

- Learning how to ask questions (i.e., "genuine questioning") about what one believes is important or useful to know or understand at a given moment. Learners with learning disabilities, along with their classmates, learned an academic code knowledge for reading school texts and writing about them, solving math problems, and discussing current events,
- Having students use language as the medium and means through which they can build knowledge and become literate. In other words, knowing how to genuinely question meant acquiring the procedural knowledge necessary to perform competenly within applicable contexts, at the appropriate moment, in the legitimate way, and
- Using discourse for constructing and reconstructing students' views of their own and their classmates' roles and capacities. Students were engaged in public conversations about their academic work in ways that acknowledged the academic viability of their experience.

(Rex, 2000: 320)

The above studies share the following characteristics:

(a) They are conducted in research sites where students and teachers show a significant variety of personal, sociocultural, educational, and professional backgrounds.
(b) They provide accounts of classroom processes originated from longitudinal studies carried out at a larger scale and through the combination of a variety of methods of data collection, selection, transcription, and analysis: extensive documentation, participant and non-participant observations, coding systems, teacher and student narratives, group discussions, structured and semi-structured interviews, tests, collaborative review of transcriptions, etc.
(c) They examine classroom discourse as a means of developing inclusionary curricula with emphasis on interactive intelectual resources and social relationships among the classroom participants;

(d) They relate their analysis of classroom phenomena to sociocultural theories of learning, which claim that social environment and any mediational means, particularly language, both form and transform development (Kraker, 2000).

(e) They conceive access and inclusion as realized in and through classroom interaction. In addition, mutually beneficial, reciprocal social relationships among classroom participants enhance intellectual inquiry linked to academic performance (Rex and McEachen, 1999);

(f) They claim that effective instruction for students with LDs is based on relevant, consistent, and well-understood organizational and management activities in the classroom that allow teachers to maximize the time they allocate to academic talk with students (Jordan et al., 1996).

(g) They argue against practices requiring highly individualized interventions for students with LDs or their placement in mainstream classrooms organized according to traditional methodologies (Gutiérrez and Stone, 1997).

A further common characteristic of these studies is that they were originated from general education research carried out in classes of English and other academic subjects within elementary and secondary schools. On the other hand, foreign language educators and special educators researchers seem to still be strongly influenced by quantitative approaches to educational inquiry (Arries, 1999), despite the previously mentioned tendency of L2 classroom research toward multiple research disciplines and perspectives (Kramsch, 2000; Lightbown, 2000).

As I have pointed in the first section of this presentation, the current state of classroom-based research in second language teaching and learning clearly demonstrates the capacity (and the interest) to conduct studies on the development and behavior of L2 learners with LDs based on a wide range of theoretical frameworks and methodological procedures. Future research should attempt to find a balance between traditional research on learning disabilities based on quantitative methodologies, and more innovative research developed through the combination of techniques and procedures with the purpose of dealing with the multiple and multifaceted

dimensions of classroom behavior. This kind of research would allow us to gather essential information about

- the processes of socialization and interaction in the L2 classroom.
- the expectations, beliefs, and attitudes of teachers and students with regard to their involvement and outcomes in L2 instruction.
- the characteristics of the discourse employed by different types of students and teachers while interacting in the classroom.

Finally, the findings of the above studies may provide language teachers and language teacher educators with a number of relevant dimensions leading to a successful inclusion of students with LDs in foreign language classrooms. These dimensions include:

- The need for teachers, both beginning and experienced, to expand their perspectives to include an interactive approach to teaching and learning (Rex, 2000).
- The relationship between beliefs and practices in the personal and pedagogical interaction with students with learning disabilities (Jordan et al, 1997).
- The role of teachers as mediators, integrating the background experiences and cultural knowledge of students with disabilities into classroom curriculum and instructional activity (Rex, 2000).
- The importance of developing principled organizational and managerial skills in order to reinforce the quality of interactional inclusion (Jordan et al, 1997: 92).
- The teacher's choice of discourse methods as a means of promoting academic capability and social integration of different kinds of students (Kraken, 2000; Rex, 2000).

In sum, language teacher education supportive of inclusion would focus on preparing teachers to understand the social climates of their classrooms, to apply a principled set of practices that call for students to adopt a way of working with a variety of pedagogical tasks, to measure linguistic and cultural development in a second or foreign language as an evolving social phenomenon, and "to see the power of discourse as the crucible within which knowledge and identity are created" (Rex and McEachen, 1999: 122).

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